

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
April 7, 2024

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 148; 1 John 1:1-2:2  
John 20:19

Here's the question I have. If Jesus was crucified, and they laid him in the tomb, and on the third day the women came to the tomb and found it empty, and then went to where the male disciples were hiding and declared that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and the men disciples did not believe them, then WHY were the disciples still hanging around Jerusalem? Why were they still together? Why didn't they just go home?

You've gotta wonder about the disciples. They were scared of following Jesus to the judgment hall, except for Peter; they were too scared to go to the crucifixion and see Jesus hang there, except for John. They didn't have the faith to go to the tomb even though Jesus promised he would rise, and when some of the women come back from the tomb and told the awesome story of hearing the announcement of an angel on Easter morning, most of the disciples STILL didn't have the gumption to go there themselves.

They don't have the strength to stick by Jesus, or to wait for Jesus, but they don't have the strength to LEAVE him, either. What was holding onto them to stay? What was holding them there?

I have to shake my head in dismay when I think of them. What a disappointment. I can't bring myself to call them disciples, because they AREN'T really following Jesus. I have been at meetings where I have said, "Well, are we going forward with something, or do we go back to what we were doing?" And everyone just looks at me, and says nothing. They don't know their own opinion. They don't KNOW what to say.

So, is it group psychology?! What were the eleven doing there, all day, then? One saying, "Let's get out of here." Another saying, "No, let's stay." Were they afraid to go out, in case their enemies were looking for them? Or, was someone saying about Jesus, "At least I can give him three days. I'll wait for him. I owe him that."

What held them there? And what held them together? Perhaps it was the three

years of traveling with Jesus, marching round and round the hills of Galilee and Judea with the same purpose, the same excitement, the same dependence on Jesus, and the connectedness with one another, that comes from shared experience? That must count for something. That must have some weight in the answer to my question of why did they stay?

Perhaps they stayed because they were part of each other now. They were a “one,” not just 11 or 12. They were one body, even though disjointed, disagreeing with one another, and pulled in two directions. Perhaps they WERE one, not even realizing...that Jesus had been knitting them together, all along, into one fellowship... maybe not of great love, but at least of unity of purpose.

Is that what is keeping THIS church together—Messiah Lutheran of Lebanon, PA? Is that what is keeping You together? That you are “one” now... perhaps, even “family?” As the saying goes, you have gone through the war together. That makes for permanent relationships. Commitment.

That is what the disciples had. They all had the purpose of sticking it out with Jesus, when they thought he was the Christ. Now that it was in doubt if he was really the Christ, their “being united” to each other still stuck. They still stuck together, and it was good that they did. When Jesus showed up, and showed himself to them, the evening of Easter Sunday, at least TEN Of them were still hanging out, together.

I encourage you-all to stick together, and stick to it long enough, and be a church, as long as it takes.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when He called the twelve to be one church.

He knew that a church could hold together, even just because they are used to being somewhat bonded with each other. For right reasons, or for wrong, it must be that people stay together, because Jesus has PUT them together. It must be, that Jesus brought them together and wants them together, and they know it is something they ought to do, and maybe it’s even what they WANT to do, to now STAY together.

And so, in answer to my question:

That may have been the “one thing” that made the disciples remain together, when others would have left. They stayed there in that upper room, even though they didn't believe Jesus was risen... or was going to be risen... but because they were now one church.

That church, the oneness they had, spilled over into great faith, and much love, after Jesus was manifested... after He showed himself to them. Jesus appeared, because they NEEDED to see his hands and his side, split, riven asunder, with a view of his insides available, exposed. This made them sure it was really the crucified savior.

Also, they needed the PEACE he had to give them. They were sore afraid, with the doors locked from every stranger outside, and they needed their fears turned into peace. Jesus gave them that, breathing HIS peace, into the room.

And then, they needed His Holy Spirit's presence shared with them. They would need that after He ascended. When Jesus would ascend, up above, to heaven, they would rely on His Holy Spirit to live within each of them, to make them connected to one another, and to Christ.

They needed the Holy Spirit, to continue on in the works Jesus had begun. It was all up to them, but NOT up to them. It was the Holy Spirit, who would do it all, by working in the disciples, working through the apostles.

And finally, they needed the forgiveness that Jesus gave them all. He gave that, AND he gave the permission to grant forgiveness to the rest of the unbelieving world. They would encounter many who were full of sin in the world; those people needed to hear the word of forgiveness themselves. But moreover, they needed to hear it from CHRIST HIMSELF. And through his disciples, God would do the forgiving, as if from his very self, via the disciples' words, and with His authority, saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” In Jesus' name.

What a mission to carry out! You who are on the congregation council here, you may have been made to think that you have to fix the church building, fund missionaries, pray for the sick, and feed the hungry, but all Jesus told them to do the first

day, of first importance, was go and forgive peoples' sins.

Well, THAT sounds easy enough. But people resist when they hear the words of today's passage. They say, "Oh, pastors don't have the right to forgive peoples' sins, and certainly I don't have the right to forgive someone else's sins. And no one can forgive MY sins..., but GOD."

Except Jesus gives us this right. And authority. And command. In this passage. See today's lesson!

God has GIVEN the permission for you and me to forgive the sins of others. We have only to say, for Jesus's sake, your sins are forgiven. And just as I said on Maundy Thursday, your sins are forgiven, for Jesus's sake, it was not by MY power, or by your earning it; your sins are forgiven---and it is done, now, according to JESUS' Word.

O what a community we could be, if everyone would be coming for forgiveness openly. Coming clean with one another about our sins. O forgive me, brother, for I have sinned, in speaking against you. O, if everyone would come clean with one another, about their weaknesses, confessing...I need YOUR HELP, brother-of-mine, sister-of-mine, for my many weak moments, and oft falling. Tell one another our failures, of when we did not believe...and faithfully stick up for one another, and stick together...just like the first disciples...and in love we would pray for one another.

But we would not dare do that. And sometimes for good reason. For we do not trust each other. As I said, for good reason. Some of us are not trustworthy. Also, we CAN'T trust one another, because of the darkness that we prefer to dwell in. It makes us sin against each other. And we would rather dwell in darkness, and behind closed doors, preferring to make believe that we are good Christians, preferring to believe that Christ is not just on the other side of that door, waiting patiently, for us to become good Christians. For then we would HAVE to change.

But He IS waiting...for us to prefer dwelling in the Light!

As the lesson in the letter of 1<sup>st</sup> John says, our Lord showed himself, and we know he had the nail sign in his hands and the spear mark in his side, and yet,...still we don't

truly believe it. He appeared as fully bodily present, and we still won't see it. If we did break with our fears, and repent our stubborn pride, we would have fellowship with one another--and others, the whole world, would want to have fellowship with us.

And if we DID walk in the light, as HE is in the light, walk in the light with one another (the fellowship of those with cleansed sins), we would be true children of God.

But we have made it so complicated, being too wise, to trust Christ like we should, like a child would, and trust in his ways, in his words. Oh yes, like Thomas, we are too wise, to believe, and obey. O Thomas, we know, it's not because you COULDN'T believe, but because you WOULDN'T believe, we know!

The early church came to believe, though, after Thomas, the hold-out, the final one to accept it, was invited to put his fingers in Christ's hands, and his hand in Christ's side. How about -- let's you and me not demand signs like that, to hold out for full disclosure of every little thing, every question, and a full explanation of those things we are to hang on to by faith.

Let's really decide for the joy of trusting, and jumping in the deep end, and just believe in Him, like a little child.

And when we believe, it will make us, truly disciples. True apostles. Loving and sharing and unlocking the door of ourselves we have shut--THIS will make us one with one another.

And will make of this Messiah Lutheran, Lebanon, one church.

So, here's what will answer my original question...Of what kept those lost disciples together. It's what will keep us together. It's the peace of God which passes all understanding, that will keep our hearts and our minds, through Christ Jesus our Lord.

His peace for us will do it. His forgiveness for us will do it. Receive the Holy Spirit (Ah, I know you want to resist! O, but let's not make the Holy Spirit wait!!!). Receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will do all the rest of it for us.

That we may have life, and have Full life, starting now...in His name. Amen.